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ABSTRACT

This essay is an examination of a particular kind of change which has been made with some frequency in recent motion pictures derived from novels. Because the market for cinema is youth and the young people of the country are largely disenchanted with foreign languages, motion pictures derived from novels are occasionally rewritten in such a way that the use of a foreign language by a sympathetic character in the original is rewritten in the screenplay. Examples of this are found in "The Godfather," during the first part of which Michael found Italian an incorrect medium for expressing his feelings in the restaurant. Other examples are "Cabaret," "Brother Sun and Sister Moon," "A Clockwork Orange," and "A Separate Peace." Such rewriting does violence to the set of symbols used by the novelist, and is to be condoned only when absolutely necessary. (Author)

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Rewrites into English: Treatments of Foreign Languages in Some Recent Popular Films

This essay is an examination of a particular kind of change which has been made with some frequency in recent motion pictures derived from novels. The kind of change which is discussed is little more, in most cases, than a minor detail, and so this essay itself must be regarded as a literary and cinematic hologram which has been trimmed and clipped many times, but is, just possibly, still large enough to project dimly the image of an entire intellectual trend of the popular culture. The change has to do with foreign languages, and, since the author is a teacher of languages, that means that the point of the essay is not a dispassionate one, and that the concern expressed in the thesis is, admittedly, not disinterested.

The market in cinema is youth. That has been true for some years and the interviews with a selection of movie moguls in a recent Esquire assure us that, without exception, sixteen to twenty-eight year olds will continue to be the currency of the cinema.[1] Foreign languages currently have small cachet among this age group. A recent survey by the Modern Language Association revealed that enrollments in the traditional languages are off drastically on both the secondary and collegiate levels.[2] Americans have never felt that they needed a second language for the conduct of business. The liberal arts curriculum has in recent years become less liberal and more utilitarian, which means that the truly useless two years of a foreign language has been eliminated at many colleges as a requirement. Most insidious of all is the myth of a universal language. The thought that English will make the whole world kin appeals to the

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hopeful concept which many young people have of the world as community. Xenophanes says somewhere: "The Ethiopians say that their gods are snub-nosed and black, the Thracians that theirs have light blue eyes and red hair... if cattle and horses or lions had hands, or were able to draw with their hands and do the works that men can do, horses would draw the forms of the gods like horses, and cattle like cattle, and they would make their bodies such as they each had themselves."[3] It follows that the heroes of youth will be at least monolingual, and probably English-speaking, and this predisposition causes some interesting changes to be worked upon popular novels as they are written into successful films.

The Godfather made its most direct appeal to youth. Popularly portrayed as oppressed and excluded, youth unwillingly assumes the reins of another corrupt government out of a filial piety that would have made Aeneas himself flush with pride. That, I believe, was the allegory. In a system totally corrupt only personal morality is valid, was the lesson.

Several times the atmosphere of the film is enhanced by the use of Sicilian dialect while the English translation is flashed across the bottom of the screen. The effect, far from detracting from the drama, is to intensify it in the scene in which Luca Brasi is garrotted. His treacherous interview with Sollozzo in the empty cocktail lounge is all the more sinister in the obscurity of a foreign tongue. Another scene of Websterian gore is the confrontation of Michael, Sollozzo and McCluskey. In the novel, after the men seated themselves at the table, Sollozzo apologized to McCluskey for speaking Italian to Michael, but he felt that his English was deficient for the ideas he wanted to express and we were told that he actually spoke Sicilian.[4] Michael answered in the same language.

Mario Puzo is not the most precise writer in the history of B literature, but he gives no indication that the language changes between the start of the conversation and Michael's retirement to the restroom.

Not so the Paramount version. Coppola Has Al Pacino begin to answer Sollozzo's rhetoric in Italian with more cminous subtitles across the bottom of tne screen. Then he abandons it in apparent frustration. In the novel, Michael hiding in Sicily apolog'zed for his insults to Apollonia in his own Italian directly to her father (pp.355ff.); in the Coppola rendition he speaks through Fabrizio's interpretation. Sicilian is too difficult for Michael.

He is probably the only figure in the film with whom the young audience could identify. James Caan's Sonny was too much a Semitic Dionysus; Al Pacino appealed to the Apollonian Narcissism of youth. But the idols of the young shall speak no foreign language, seems to be the dictum; to be different, even in this accidental way, would be to be disqualified from godhead. It is important to realize that this change in The Godfather is gratuitous. There is, for dramatic purposes, no reason why Michael could not be as capable in Sicilian in the film as he was in the novel. There is an external reason. Having only a single language is as important to the current heroes of the movies as red hair to the gods of the Thracians.

Ignorance of foreignlanguages is a lgitimate facet of a character in a film when it is necessary for some reason to suppose ignorance in order to maintain the artistic integrity of the film. Liza Minnelli's embarassing attempts at German in Cabaret are well done; Isherwood's Sally Bowles spoke it atrociously as well. The treatment of Francis of Assisi's Latin by

Zeffirelli, on the other hand, is execrable. Francis studied Latin and French.[5] Graham Faulkner, as directed by Zeffirelli, barily seems to have a language at all, unless it is body language. His most eloquent expression is disrobing.

An analogous case is the filming of Burgess' A Clockwork Orange. "Nadsat" is sufficiently complex and strange to qualify as a foreign language, and much of the pleasure of the book derived from the reader's gradually absorbing enough of it to understand the first person narrator's dialect with ease. Much of the literary pleasure of the novel derived from the terrifying portrayal of Alex, quite as disgusting after his reformation, persecution and recuperation as before. In Kubrick's version, Malcolm McDowell, lying in traction, being spoonfed by the newly risen minister, seemed less repulsive than Alex lying listening to Beethoven at the end of the novel. If I am not mistaken, his English also seemed clearer. Kubrick has published a text with stills of the entire motion picture and one can compare the novel and the film word by word and image by image.[6] The differences are not startling, but they are significant. Not all of the oddities of nadsat have been eliminated; instead, the director has deleted only as many as are necessary to make the dialogue and descriptive narration comprehensible. For instance, in the scene of the bludgeoning of the drunken singer at the very beginning "vesch" and "starry" have been changed to "thing" and "old," and another nadsatism--"moodge"--has been eliminated completely.[7] Sometimes in the middle of a longer section a sentence with a nadsatism has been omitted, as in Alex's hostile confrontation with his droogs the sentence "Let me slooshy more" (p. 51) has simply disappeared from the dialogue. The effect is that

unusual usages grate without forcing the viewer into the process of decipherment which was necessary in the novel. Alex, at the end of Kubrick's treatment, became almost a sympathetic figure and the sympathy drove the foreign elements from his speech.

Nostalgia makes vogue, and vogue causes literary stock to rise and fall. In secondary schools, that excellent piece of youthful ventriloquism Catcher in the Rye is, for a number of reasons, gradually yielding its place as the novel of adolescent awakening to the more lyrical A Separate Peace. Knowles' reminiscing narrator attempted to conjure the entire atmosphere of a New England preparatory school in the early forties--the social alliances, the clothes, the insecurity, the curriculum. The last element, at that time, was still riddled with the study of languages, largely classical, and in the novel Phinny and Gene demonstrated their familiarity with several foreign languages.

Phinny, struggling with a world which still valued the learning of a second language, slipped Gene little aides-memoire while his roommate tried vainly to study: "les filles en France ne wear pas les pantelons."[8] Gene, trapped in the smoking room in an ironically accusatory session with his peers, answered in jest that he had contrived the entire incident in the tree, which he called a contretemps, mispronouncing the word twice and hoping that the humor of his pronunciation would throw his unwitting tormentors off the scent (pp. 76-78). At the mock Winter Olympics of '44 one of the prizes was a Greek copy of the Iliad with an interlinear translation (p. 116). With a fine juvenile sense of appropriateness it was covered with cider and ignited as a mock Olympic torch. Phinny, lying in the infirmary with his leg broken for the second time, answered a too enthusiastic wrestling coach only with famous dullnesses from Caesar's

Gallic Wars, which Gene in one scene had helped him translate and fit into the private view of war as hoax (p. 166). Gene divided the day on which Phinny died into morning and afternoon by recalling his two sessions of reading and preparing Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme (pp. 74-75).

This part of the atmosphere has evaporated in Fred Segal's screenplay for Paramount. John Heyl makes faces from behind a bookcase to distract Parker Stevenson from his homework. Stevenson doesn't use the word contretemps at all in the smoker. He rises with a heavy heart and simply escapes to his French. The Olympic torch is a trashcan. The Spieltrieb of language is lost. Elements of the old style of education do appear, but only for vestigial reference or disparagement. When Gene receives a long distance call from Phinny in the tyrant Ludbury's study, the wall behind him has the warm glow of the gold spines of the old Latin and Greek elementary textbooks; the English teacher, portrayed as unnoticing and boorish, dismisses the boys with exeunt omnes and an admonition to a guiltless student that he should pay better attention during Latin class. Heyl and Stevenson turn what was the serious effort of stumbling through Caesar into a joke in Negro dialect. On the day of the death, Stevenson leaves Phinny's room in the infirmary for a recollective walk through the snow to the river and the tree.

I have mentioned Gene's play with the pronunciation of contretemps in the novel and that he does not use it in the motion picture. The word does occur in the picture, however. Brinker, the officious legalist and insensitive moralist of the story, the instigator of the kangaroo court, uses it: he wants to get to the bottom of this contretemps. That is the principle. Characters with whom we are to

identify must not be proficient in a second language, must not even joke in one, but may suffer through them. What teacher of undergraduates who has ever had to halt a lecture in mid-career to explain the meaning of genre or to spell leitmotif will not recognize the attitude which removes contretemps from the vocabulary of the young hero and puts it in the mouth of his teenage inquisitor?

One can hardly fault filmmakers for being more interested in images than words. At the same time one can question the employers of language for betraying it, and I would submit that in each of the above cases the screenwriter has done a disservice to the original text, and not one which was made necessary through cinematic exigencies but a calculatedly commercial change. There is a legitimate language of the cinema; there are also other legitimate languages. There is a legitimate system of symbols for the filmmaker and another for the author. It is part of the task of anyone seeking to combine the two to protect the interests of both.

We have already seen on the screen the inevitable outcome of the neglect of foreign languages in our educational system and of the easy attitude with which we accept the status of English as this decade's international language. Near the top of my list of favorite directors is Federico Fellini, and I awaited the appearance of Roma with bated breath. My reaction, after The Clowns and Fellini's Satyricon, was that I prefer my phantasmagoria unalloyed with documentary. The masterful portrayal of the young director's first arrival in Rome put the pseudo-documentary sections to shame. Part of the charm of the recollection was the spirit of the Italian. Much of the disappointment of the documentary was the unattractiveness of the film crew's English. It became clear to me that

I preferred the incomprehensible language of the black girl in Fellini's Satyricon to the arhythmic and toneless English of the German script girl in Roma. Fellini knows his market, however, an English-speaking market largely, and if one lives in a culture which disvalues languages one must endure the patronizing of semi-polyglots.

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FOOTNOTES

[1]"Coming Attractions: The All-New American Dream," Esquire, March, 1973, pp. 81-89.

[2]"Language Study: The Accent is Grave," New York Times 6 May 1973, sec. 4, p. 11, cols. 1-3. Exotic languages have, of course, been hurt by the cutbacks of federal funding.

[3]Xenophanes, fragments 15 and 16, quoted from G. S. Kirk and J. E. Raven, The Presocratic Philosophers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), pp. 168-69.

[4]Mario Puzo, The Godfather (New York: G. P. Putnam's, 1969), pp. 150-51. It is important to remember, for what follows, that Puzo felt more or less excluded from the writing of the novel into a screenplay; see M. Puzo, "The Making of The Godfather" in The Godfather Papers and Other Confessions (New York: G. P. Putnam's, 1972), pp. 32-69.

[5]L. Hardick, "St. Francis of Assisi," The New Catholic Encyclopedia, 1967.

[6]Stanley Kubrick's A Clockwork Orange (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972).

[7]Anthony Burgess, A Clockwork Orange (London: Heinemann, 1972), p. 13. Stanley Kauffmann, The New Republic, 1 January 1972, p. 22, complained as well about the disappearance of the dialect from the film.

[8]John Knowles, A Separate Peace (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1961), p. 46.